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# **Cumulus Rovaniemi Conference**

## **The Visual Driver; promoting clarity and coherence.**

**David Gardener, Michael Pinkney**

Northumbria University, Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

[David.Gardener@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:David.Gardener@northumbria.ac.uk)

[Michael.Pinkney@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.Pinkney@northumbria.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

Drawing from a research-based case study for a vision support charity, this professional paper articulates the role of a 'visual driver' as a key tool in shaping a rebranding. The 'visual driver' is a visual-based rubric of nine subjects, each with an image critically selected to capture the personality and essence of an entity. The paper discusses challenges around identifying the subtleties of a brand, how it behaves, its world outlook, its tone of voice. All difficult to define. However, once established, the designer's journey towards creating a successful brand with personality becomes clear. Furthermore, the participatory nature of the 'visual driver' rubric – as it passes between designer and client, communicates early ideation as well as initiating an informed dialogue between multiple parties. The flexibility, accessibility and the participatory nature of this method are especially critical when working alongside clients with sensory impairments. The case study within the paper demonstrates the flexibility of the 'Visual Driver' to incorporate textures which enhance the effectiveness of the tool for an organisation dealing with visual impairment. The paper articulates how the 'visual rubric' enables designers to work collaboratively with clients, comparing their creative thinking and ensuring a better awareness and understanding of the brand challenges from client and end-user perspectives. Increasingly, developing a modern brand strategy demands a multiplicity of additional sensory feedback— aural, touch sonic etc. The paper concludes by presenting and discussing how a multisensory 'visual driver' was used to facilitate a rebrand.

## **Author keywords**

Brand Strategy; Multisensory Branding; Organisational Development, Design Thinking, Participatory Design Process. Graphic Design Process.

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## **Introduction and the theoretical underpinning**

The term 'Branding' within the current creative sector, is a relatively new term, that has become ubiquitous when discussing product and service merchandising, however, it's historical impact can be traced back to Anglo Saxon times when farmers using uniquely designed hot metal forms branded their livestock to ensure ownership rights. The term Branding derives from the Nordic term 'brandr' (Clifton, et al, 2009.) that means literally to burn. Its success and impact depends not only on how it differentiates itself from the competitors (George and Anandkumar, 2018), but, more importantly as this study sets out to establish, how it communicates with its audience. This final aspect is central to this study; it is the fundamental reason why brands resonate with their audience. As audiences become more complex the need to harmonize a branding message with all stakeholders, not only the traditional consumers but its staff, central government, press, financial analysts, competitors etc., is ever more important. Today, the corporate reputation is recognised as a very valuable resource which has to be managed from the centre, in a coherent, sophisticated and long-term fashion (Olins, 2008). The 'visual driver' is central to the way that these complex decisions can be made, in an accessible and inclusive way.

The 'visual driver' is a visual-based rubric of nine subjects (Figure 1), each with an image critically selected to capture the personality and essence of an entity (Figure 2).

The 'visual driver's' historical origins can be aligned to Kurt Lewin's Organisation Development (OD) that emerged during the 1930's to drive change within large organisations. One of the developments derived from that was an intervention based theory called Organisational Climate, that identified the mood or personality of a business (Trullen and Bartunek, 2007). This is particularly closely aligned to the creative practice of using Visual drivers, in that it interrupts current ways of thinking and offers the participants new ways of approach. Trullen and Bartunek also emphasise that the originators also have a clear map of what they all want and need to accomplish thus becoming committed to that ideal. Those values align perfectly with the intent of the 'visual driver'.

<i>Car</i>	<i>Animal</i>	<i>Shoe</i>
<i>Colour</i>	<i>Font</i>	<i>Place</i>
<i>Activity</i>	<i>Chair</i>	<i>Celebrity</i>

**Figure 1.** The Visual Driver template, a collection of nine subject areas.



**Figure 2.** The Visual Driver after the collaborative design process, the personality of the brand is evident; uncompromising, larger than life, exciting, daring.



Studios use a whole variety of different methods for visually capturing the essence of a client/project/brief. In our experience Mood boards are the most commonly used tool for this task. McDonagh and Storer state that "Mood boards potentially provide the designer with a sensory-centric (i.e. beyond the visual) approach to aid their communication and encourage inspiration/innovation" (McDonagh and Storer, 2004).

We first came across the use of 'visual drivers' in our professional practice when we sat in a presentation by Landor to a client we were working with at the time. We have used this tool both in our professional practice and in our teaching of undergraduate Graphic Design students ever since.

We have adapted the tool to our needs and now use a version of it on every project within the Branding pathway at Northumbria University Newcastle, BA (Hons) Graphic Design course. As McDonagh and Storer suggest "Mood boards have complex and multiple functions. They can be used to express and communicate emotions, feelings and/or moods. In addition, they are intended to promote lateral thinking around what may otherwise be a mundane design task" (McDonagh and Storer, 2004). This Professional paper starts to articulate why we believe that 'visual drivers' are a distinctly different tool from mood boards in that they are more specific in helping the designer define the characteristics of a brand.

This professional paper is the first point at which we have tried to define the value of the 'visual driver' and forms the starting point for future research around their value compared to other 'defining tools' used by professional designers and academics.

In the following case study, it demonstrates the flexibility of this visual tool in that it can also be used to establish different aspects of a brand, such as where it currently sat before the rebrand and the old/existing/new audience, each one potentially having its own 'visual driver'.

## **Case Study**

In 2018 the Graphic Design degree was approached by Newcastle Society for Blind People (NSBP) to undertake a student project to improve their organisation's Branding and Communication. The NSBP is one of the oldest charitable organisations in Newcastle, established in 1867, who's key ethos is to promote independent living to the visually impaired.

The project had to tackle the key challenges of how to effectively communicate the charities services and values to current stakeholders and new audiences in an increasingly competitive market.

It was decided to break the project into three phases. Phase 1 would consist of a branding workshop, phase 2 would be a student brief which would sit within a second-year Graphic Design Module called 'Collaboration and Professional Engagement within Graphic Design'. This module always contains an external brief in association with a regional or national charity, so fitted perfectly. The project would involve 48 second year students, specialising in the Branding pathway on the Graphic Design degree. Phase 3 would be the delivery and launch of a new identity and associated design collateral.

## *Phase 1*

Costings were submitted and accepted and the branding workshop was arranged. One of the initial exercises in the workshop involved 'visual drivers'. 'Visual drivers' are a simple and effective way of capturing elements of the personality of an organisation. They can also have an important role to play in creative branding workshops as a way of initiating an informed dialogue about the core values and personality traits of an organisation. In our experience, the exercise can initially be met with some skepticism but once participants become engaged in assigning these values and traits in an inclusive and relaxed setting, the dialogue can be very valuable and participants usually become very engaged in the process of 'defining the personality of their business'. It is important for the design team to be involved in these discussions because the participatory nature of the exercise gives valuable insights into the organisation and can be the starting point for the early ideations and new directions that the brand may take.

We had several key aspects to consider with this project based on the unique requirements of working with a sight-loss and visual impairment charity. We had to change the name of the exercise to 'personality grids' because we were concerned that an exercise using the name 'visual drivers' in the title might immediately alienate some of the workshop participants who were partially sighted or completely blind. We also had to consider the practical problem of using an essentially visual exercise in this context. This was a problem we never had to consider before.

In discussion with the staff of NSBP we decided to introduce several new elements including texture instead of a colour, a music genre instead of a typeface and a type of food instead of a chair. We did this to try and involve more of the senses in the exercise, so participants would be actively engaging with a physical texture but would also be thinking about auditory representation through musical genres and also considering taste and types of food.

To address the issues that some participants might have with being unable to clearly distinguish colours and patterns on the cards due to visual impairments, we introduced a key word onto the bottom of each card which gave a brief description of the image. The text was set in a sans serif font, high contrast black on white at a large point size, making it as legible as possible. This followed the 'Making it Clear' guidelines laid out by 'Action for Blind People', another UK based charity which helps blind or partially sighted people. These guidelines were recommended to us by NSBP and gave us a very useful guide for all of the subsequent work we did with the charity.



**Figure 3.** The multisensory 'personality grid' in use during a Newcastle Society for Blind People workshop session.

The workshops involved thirteen participants and three facilitators. The participants included staff and volunteers from NSBP, long-standing supporters of the charity and service users. We divided the participants into 3 groups and one facilitator looked after a group each. We spent approximately 30 minutes on defining the 'Personality Grids' (Figure 3).

The results of the exercise were used to inform a general impression of the organisation's personality as follows:

In summary:

*NSBP is an approachable and friendly organisation. It is small, but strong and full of personality. Reliable, supportive and tenacious, the organisation is made up of passionate individuals who are dedicated to the goal of empowering adults with sight loss.*

*The team works through projects together, dividing the workload to enable individual team members to focus their expertise in response to dynamic challenges. This allows the team to achieve great things through collaboration.*

*The working environment is warm and welcoming, providing a safe and calm space within the city centre. Service users are engaged by the team through practical, bespoke, support that is validated by the organisations heritage and long history of providing assistance to those affected by visual impairment.*

*Over its long history, NSBP has adapted to change and overcome many challenges. This has caused the organisation to develop into a robust yet adaptable entity, which is well positioned to respond to an uncertain future. It is clear however, that the organisation has developed an old-fashioned image and needs to work hard to foster greater awareness within the region.*

This summary was extremely useful in the next phase of the workshop which was to address the name and assess whether it was 'fit for purpose' or needed a rethink. The separate words within the name, Newcastle Society for Blind People, were considered and benchmarked against the findings from the previous exercises, as follows:

**Newcastle: very important to keep** (...The working environment is warm and welcoming, providing a safe and calm space within the city centre)

**Society: Considered to have connotations of secrecy and being old-fashioned** (...NSBP is an approachable and friendly organisation... It is clear however, that the organisation has developed an old-fashioned image)

**Blind: could put people off who are not blind. Most service users suffer from varying degrees of sight loss and visual impairment** (...dedicated to the goal of empowering adults with sight loss... providing assistance to those affected by visual impairment...)

**People: This is a given and deemed unnecessary**

A new name, Newcastle Vision Support, was proposed. This name reiterated the values defined in the 'personality grid' exercise and reinforced the usefulness of this exercise as a key tool in shaping the various stages of a rebrand. The name was presented to the charities board and unanimously approved. This was a significant moment, being the only name change in the organisation's 150-year history.

## *Phase 2*

The next stage of the project, was to take the findings and brief the students. The organisation's leadership team visited the University and gave a presentation and discussed the issues faced by people with visual impairment and sight loss. The staff team then gave the students the brief (Figure 4) and a presentation which required them to design a new logo, a set of simple brand guidelines and other assets.

# Br&ing

## Assignment brief

## Is there anybody out there?

*Introducing the professional working environment of Graphic Design*

### Background

Newcastle Society for Blind People (NSBP) is a small, independent charity supporting over 1,000 visually impaired people in Newcastle. NSBP formed nearly 150 years ago but its ethos remains much the same as when it was created in 1867. The organisation helps visually impaired people to be independent through information and learning activities, keeping in touch through people services, social groups and empowerment work.

NSBP is an approachable and friendly organisation. Reliable, supportive and tenacious, the organisation is made up of passionate individuals who are dedicated to the goal of empowering adults with visual impairment. The working environment is warm and welcoming, providing a safe and calm space within the city centre. Service users are engaged by the team through practical, bespoke, support that is validated by the organisations heritage and long history of providing assistance to those affected by visual impairment.

Over its long history, NSBP has adapted to change and overcome many challenges. This has caused the organisation to develop into a robust yet adaptable entity, which is well positioned to respond to an uncertain future. It is clear however, that the organisation has developed an old fashioned image and needs to work hard to foster greater awareness within the locality.

### The Brief

Coinciding with NSBP's 150 year anniversary, the organisation wishes to update it's name and visual identity. Your group has been tasked with rebranding NSBP and develop an identity that better reflects the organisation's personality and services. The organisation's new name has been developed in the weeks leading up to this briefing, through a workshop lead by Northumbria University and will be announced to you next week.

The majority of people being supported by NSBP are aged over 65, but they provide help to anyone aged over 18. The organisation is staffed by volunteers and paid staff. Staff wages and charitable activity is made possible by membership fees, donations, legacies and funding grants. You need to carefully consider these different audiences and NSBP's service users when developing your design solutions.

### The Ask:

*Develop the following:*

### Assets:

- A Design Identity
- Logo
- Colour palette
- Typeface/typefaces
- Set of brand guidelines

### Implementation:

- Website - Flat designs for Home page and several others
- Print - Leaflet and poster designs.

### Study guide:

**18/10**

10AM - Briefing and Presentation  
PM - Background research on NSBP

**25/10**

AM - Drop-in crits with Chris Wilson  
PM - Client Presentation & name reveal with Q&A

**01/11**

Group Tutorials:  
(All day - Following group timings)  
Mike Pinkney, Chris Wilson

**08/11**

Group Tutorials  
Mike Pinkney, Chris Wilson

**15/11**

Group Tutorials:  
Mike Pinkney, Chris Wilson

**22/11**

Group Tutorials:  
Mike Pinkney, Chris Wilson

**29/11**

Group Tutorials:  
Mike Pinkney, Chris Wilson

**06/12**

Final Presentation to client

**09/12**

Final Hand-in

### Location guide:

#### Tuesdays

SQW109 - Branding Crit Room.

### Deadline/timeline:

Final presentations - Tues 6th December  
Hand-in - Friday 9th December  
(Time TBC).

Group project will be submitted in one portfolio per group with one set of collated and bound research. All work should be mounted cleanly and professionally with pdf on a USB. PDF also to be uploaded to ELP.

### How the work will be assessed:

Your work will be assessed against the following Learning Outcomes:

#### 1. Knowledge and Understanding

Research, Experimentation And Development  
Demonstrate a clear investigation of the subject.

Explore a range of techniques, principles and approaches.  
Identify an effective creative approach.  
Indicative Weighting - 30%

#### 2. Intellectual Skills

##### Creative Solution

Understand and develop original concepts.  
Communicate an appropriate solution, demonstrating creativity and imagination.  
Ensure the final outcome satisfies the demands of the brief.

Indicative Weighting - 30%

#### 3. Practical Skills

##### Technical Ability And Presentation

Develop design skills and craftsmanship.  
Demonstrate technical proficiency with appropriate attention to detail.  
Ensure the submission has been well organised and presented.  
Indicative Weighting - 30%

#### 4. Transferable/Key Skills

##### Studentship

Develop effective time management and personal commitment.  
Demonstrate critical self-analysis and personal reflection.  
Engage with programme and peer group.  
Indicative Weighting - 10%

**Figure 4.** Student project brief, with the background story derived from the workshop 'personality grid' sessions earlier.

The summary findings from the initial 'personality grid/visual driver' exercise in the brand workshop, were included on the brief as one of the key elements which would form the basis from which the students would tackle the design of the logo and other visual material.

The students worked in teams of 4 and had approximately 6 weeks to work on the project, having one contact point with Graphic Design staff a week (Note – they had other projects running parallel to this project as well). The 'client', NVS, came in three times throughout the project, once to brief, to give some mid-point feedback and for final presentations. The students all visited the NVS offices and interviewed the staff working there to gather more insight.

As the students moved through the project they adhered to the following structure; Initial briefing based on findings from the brand workshop, research into NSBP, research into other charities in the sector, research into sight loss and the issues around it, leading to brand values and mission statement (as well as possible straplines). Three possible routes were then developed and one was chosen from those. This was then developed and refined into a final logo and it was demonstrated how this would be implemented across other material.

The final presentations went extremely well and the chosen logo (Figure 5) captured the essence of the organisation, it embodied two of the words used in the new name i.e. Vision (abstracted representation of an eye) and Support (abstracted representation of two elements working dynamically together).

### *Phase 3*

After the final presentations, one approach was selected to refine the creative approach. The successful team worked on the final stage of the brief with the organisation, along with the staff team, in refining the colours, the strapline and implementing the new designs across a whole range of materials.



**Figure 5.** Final identity and example execution.

## Conclusion

The experience gained over the last few years implementing the 'visual driver' within our curriculum and more recently with the case study from the Newcastle Vision Support (NVS) charity demonstrated the inherent fluid values of the 'visual driver'.

Within our Graphic Design degree, it has enabled us to fully embrace the tool within the curriculum. Our students also trust in the 'visual driver' as an integral part of their own creative process in branding focused projects. As Lucero and Martens state they can capture the 'atmosphere of experiences' by means of photographs or other expressive aids (Lucero and Martens, 2006).

This paper has uniquely highlighted the innovative, yet deceptively simple creative rubric in use on a Graphic Design degree and how the onset of multisensory branding can be given a value within the 'visual driver' format.

As a participatory tool its success is judged by the fact that you don't have to be a designer to understand it and more importantly, to engage with it. By its inclusive nature it can interrupt current thinking, and the facilitators or designers can swap in/swap out additional sensory elements if needed. It is this flexing in the creative process that harbors a strong sense of ownership amongst the participants.

To quote Robert Burns, even the 'best laid schemes' can go askew, and in the case with NVS that demanded particular modifications, our relationship with the 'visual driver' deepened our understanding of this highly flexible, inclusive and accessible tool.

### **Acknowledgments**

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